

# **“IN THEIR OWN IMAGE: GREEK-AUSTRALIANS” NATIONAL PROJECT—ENGAGING AND LINKING COMMUNITIES**

Leonard Janiszewski, Research Fellow; Effy Alexakis, Senior Photographer with the Center for Flexible Learning, Australian History Museum, Macquarie University, New South Wales, Australia

## **Abstract**

“In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians” National Project was established 21 years ago by photographer Effy Alexakis and historian Leonard Janiszewski. We are researching and documenting the Greek-Australian historical and contemporary presence both nationally and internationally—resulting in books, research articles, multimedia displays, successful international touring exhibitions and a documentary for television. In 2001, the project became an associate of the Australian History Museum at Macquarie University. We provide lectures, photographic exhibitions and workshops both within the University and as an outreach activity, as well as maintain our ongoing research. That the Australian History Museum has incorporated our project within the University is both unique and significant. Projects dealing with ethnic groups have tended to be marginalized, but our current situation facilitates the mainstreaming of such research and recognition of the cultural and ethnic diversity and hybridism of Australia’s past. The project acts as a conduit between the Museum, the University and Greek-Australians, and engages the broader community through the activities arising from the research relationship. Our current research project, “‘American Beauties’ at the Niagara Café,” which will result in the production of a major book and touring exhibition, provides an excellent example of how such a relationship can provide previously untapped documentation and material to university museums and collections.

## **Introduction**

Australia is often publicly applauded and characterized, nationally and internationally, as a prominent example of cultural diversity (referred to as “multiculturalism” in Australia—the recognition of both the maintenance and development of more than one culture within its social structure). The nation claims over 200 different ethnic origins. Over 20 percent of Australians were born overseas, and other than English, Italian is the most spoken language followed by Greek, Cantonese, Arabic and Vietnamese (Burn 2002).

## **Marginalization and Insufficient Engagement**

National and state archives, libraries, museums—including university museums—and the grand narratives of Australia’s past, generally give little, or only token, recognition to the significance which cultural diversity and hybridism has had in developing the Australia of today. As a result, groups from non-English speaking backgrounds have been effectively alienated, marginalized and left broadly unacknowledged in the symbols and preeminent events and developments of Australia’s history (L. Janiszewski & E. Alexakis *in litt.* 2003). Collecting and research institutions have been insufficiently engaged with ethnic communities, and overall have made only tentative attempts to understand what matters to these groups and their effects upon the broader canvas of Australia’s past. These institutions have not offered any practical support to researchers within the community sector who were attempting to obviate these failings. Moreover, when collecting bodies have directed their attentions towards these marginalized groups, their strategies are generally public relations

(publicity) campaigns, with limited outcomes following the high-profile launches and distribution of glossy pamphlets (Burn 2002). Significantly, budget allocations specifically assigned to the ongoing costs of preserving, cataloging and displaying any material collected from such campaigns appear to be undernourished when compared to the public relations campaign funds themselves, and dramatically more so when compared to those allocated to material of British-Australian origin held by the institutions.

## **The Antithesis**

At Macquarie University in Sydney, the “In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians” National Project, working in association with the Australian History Museum and the Department of Modern History, is the antithesis of this situation. This bold and dynamic partnership is unique in its field of research and collection, firmly facilitating the obvious need to mainstream material from groups of non-English speaking backgrounds. The Project acts as an effective conduit between the Australian History Museum—with its associated scholars and students—and the Greek-Australian community. It also seeks to engage the broader Australian, and even international, community through outreach activities arising from this special relationship: collaborative touring exhibitions and museum displays; public lectures by prominent Greek-Australians; the development of teaching videos for both public and institutional use; and, potentially, a web-accessible database.

### **In Their Own Image**

The "In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians" National Project was instigated in 1982 by Sydney-based documentary photographer Effy Alexakis. I, Leonard Janiszewski, joined her the following year as an historian of Australia's social and cultural past. Over the years, collaborative assistance has been provided by a constantly broadening network of colleagues in a variety of disciplines: sociology, social anthropology, demography, linguistics, social commentary, cultural activism, political theory, journalism, archiving, museum administration, art, writing, film-making and exhibition curating and design. Their input and guidance have been essential in our pursuit of the Project's aim "to provide a rounder, more complex and detailed, social, cultural and historical image of Greek-Australians, than any previously attempted" (Janiszewski & Alexakis 1989), and, in the process, to supplement the notable absence of collected material on the Greek-Australian experience, evident within museums and archival collections around the country.

The desired material was to be found in the homes of Greek-Australians, both within Australia and overseas,

Where family snapshots, letters, diaries, private official papers, memorabilia, and living memory lay awaiting a researcher's investigative interest. The well-known dictum of British historian Richard H. Tawney, that "historians need... stronger boots," was to be well evidenced by the magnitude of our task and our blistered feet. (Janiszewski & Alexakis 1989)

As suggested, the key to our subsequent success was personal contact. We went out and worked "with" and "among" our subject, the Greek-Australian community. Preconceived notions and stereotypes were cast aside as was the institutional attitude of engaging the community only through publicity campaigns and waiting for them to respond. Furthermore, as indicated by the Project's title, "In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians," we gathered material and stories which were of importance to our subjects.

### **Research Procedure**

Initially, both the historical and contemporary presence of Greek settlement in Australia was geographically identified in each state and territory utilizing existing primary and secondary source material. Examples of the former are: Colonial and Australian census records, including a 1916 "secret census" of Greeks; early newspapers; police reports; government gazettes; significant documentary photographic collections; historical diaries and journals. The latter principally included historical and sociological research

articles, university theses and national and state listings of official Greek Orthodox communities and regional associations. Field trips were then made to locations identified as holding potential interviewees and research material. Such field trips are an ongoing necessity of the Project. A number of field trips also have been made to Greece, Cyprus and the United States. Given the weight of migration of Greeks to Australia from the first two countries, and the significant socio-cultural influence of Greeks migrating from America, it is not surprising that material on Greek-Australians was uncovered within these nations.

On-site research and oral history interviews follow strict methodological and documentation practices, including legal release for use in research, publication, electronic transmission and exhibition display.

Oral history interviews have consistently embraced broad thematic areas: life in country of origin; reasons for migration and settlement; initial settlement experiences; occupations; racism; family life; social activities; language problems; education; cultural identity; attitude toward host society; gender and generational differences; cultural maintenance; and considerations of re-migration. As oral histories, these are not quick grabs for possible sensational insights, but inquiries into the stated thematic elements across the breadth of an interviewee's experience. For those few individuals who preferred responding in written rather than oral form, questionnaires were supplied. Diversity of interviewees is considered essential within the Project, particularly regarding age, experiences, outlooks, occupations and period of migration or the number of generations removed from the original Greek forebear. We were conscious not to narrow our path but to cast our investigative net as far as we possibly could. All early interviews recorded on analogue tapes are undergoing digitization to ensure both preservation and compatibility with changing technology. Interviews have been conducted principally in English, with a small number in Greek. Detailed outlines of interviews are recorded in field notebooks and although some transcriptions of interviews have been completed, the task will continue long into the future.

All interviewees are photographed—and at times filmed—in their work, home or social environment. Their historical family photographs, private papers and memorabilia are sensitively selected, and then copied or donated, for inclusion in the Project's collection. The selection process includes an evaluation of an item's state of preservation, its historical, sociological or cultural significance within both a Greek-Australian and broader Australian community context, its common or rare status, its highlighting of the interviewee's story and whether it can be easily utilized for research and display. Identification details of all items are crosschecked through available sources, and the personal significance

of each one to its owner, or owners, is meticulously recorded.

All documentary information gathered is systematically placed in a database—an ongoing process—so that individuals and families, themes, particular types of items, photographic subjects, migration and settlement periods can be accessed, assessed and cross-referenced quickly for research purposes leading to publication or museum exhibition display. All physical items undergo preservation procedures and cataloguing.

### Research Results

Over the past two decades, the Project has painstakingly gathered an extensive archive encompassing: recorded oral history interviews; historical (Fig. 1) and contemporary (Fig. 2) photographic and cinematographic material; private and official documents and published works; and memorabilia. The collection is owned by the Project's two instigators and is recognized as one of the most comprehensive

in Australia on a group from a non-English speaking background. Its resources have produced a number of national and international touring socio-cultural history exhibitions. The principal exhibition, bearing the same title as the Project, was developed in partnership with the State Library of New South Wales. Additionally, two major books, numerous published articles, conference papers and a documentary for television have also resulted.

### A Working Partnership

In early 2001, when the project was invited to form a working partnership with the Australian History Museum and the Department of Modern History at Macquarie University, it brought with it a long and ongoing engagement with the Greek-Australian community, and a significant archive and extensive record of production in both exhibition and publication output. The union was certainly innovative. It not only placed a successful community-based project which focused upon a marginalized ethnic group within the



Fig. 1. Bill Florence (Vasilios Florias) being welcomed to Australia, Melbourne, Victoria 1922. Bill arrived in Melbourne as a young teenager from the Greek Ionian island of Ithaca. His arrival was part of the chain migration of his family to Australia. He entered the food catering industry in Victoria working in a number of "Greek cafés" before purchasing a shop, Quality Luncheon Service, in Melbourne's central business district. Marrying, and raising a family, Bill ran the business until 1969. He died in 1991, aged 84. Photo courtesy S. Raftopoulos & J. Florence, from the "In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians" National Project Archives, Macquarie University.



Fig. 2. Greek National Day celebrations on the steps of the Sydney Opera House, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, 1984. On March 25 each year, Hellenic communities across the globe celebrate the blessing given on that day in 1821 by Metropolitan Germanos of Patras, for the Greeks to enter into conflict with the Turks in the hope of achieving their freedom. Photo: Effy Alexakis, from the "In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians" National Project Archives, Macquarie University.

critical scholarly environment of one of Australia's leading universities, but it placed it directly within the heart of the two bodies whose mission it was to research and collect material detailing Australia's past. This was something very new and challenging within the existing milieu of neglect characteristic of the collection of historical material from marginalized ethnic groups. With a wonderful link forged, the Project was now in a position to submit its material directly for broad scholarly examination and interpretation, teaching and museum display, as well as create new collaborative touring exhibitions, partnered publications and joint material collection.

### **Empowering Links and Potential Revelations**

The relationship between the Project and its University partners has been empowering for the participants as well as the Greek-Australian community and the broader Australian public. Responses from many sections of Australia's Greek community clearly have revealed a sense of liberation through what they view as the start of their long awaited acceptance or inclusion into Australia's past within museum and

historical narratives. Greek language press discussions of the Project's placement within Macquarie University, unsolicited letters of support and personal phone calls from Greek-Australian individuals and representatives of regional groups and formal Hellenic organizations, all firmly augment the significance and importance of the union:

The Project's two managers...are now in a position to continue the digitizing and databasing essential for the maintenance and broader availability of their unique and comprehensive archive...to stimulate and nurture...the next generation of cultural and historical activists to ensure that the Hellenic historical and cultural presence in Australia can be used as both a unique and at times, often essential tool, through which Australia's development—since European settlement—can be viewed and interpreted. (Kyriakopoulos 2002)

Another report states:

Part of this task is the need to construct an image of Greek-Australian history as a legitimate perspective from which to observe and revise our understanding of the broader panorama and

concerns of Australia's last 200 years, rather than being content with its current limiting and demeaning research status as simply "ghetto or ethnic history"—a belittling which some historians and academics, both consciously and unconsciously, are unfortunately continuing to do in their work. (Diamadis 2002)

For Greek-Australians, the Project's partnership with Macquarie University has the potential to ensure that Greek-Australian voices and material culture—evidencing almost two centuries of a Hellenic presence in Australia—will not remain as limited curious anecdotes in museum displays or hidden among footnotes in historical publications.

For the broader Australian community, there is the potential recognition that by throwing such concentrated light upon the history of an ethnic community within a university museum and scholarly research context, the process will reveal the "cross-cultural transmissions and transformations" upon the development of mainstream Australian culture and history (Teo 2003). As has now been acknowledged, such a process previously could not occur:

If you were researching any cultural group outside British-Australians, documentation was very limited, archives hadn't collected anything and state institutions had only just begun [collecting] and that usually came from the middle class or well-to-do. (Stevenson 2001)

### **An Enterprising Lead**

Such has been the effect of the Project within its new museum and academic environment, that its research, collection and interpretative methods are now being praised as exemplary templates through which the research and gathering of material from other groups of non-English speaking backgrounds can be engaged. This praise has been voiced both from within and without the University—by academics and cultural activists—and it seems that similar community-based projects may seek to develop links with other university museums and collections who wish to follow Macquarie's enterprising lead.

### **Current Research**

Our current research project, "American Beauties' at the Niagara Café," provides an excellent example of how such a working relationship can provide previously untapped documentation and material to university museums and collections and what outreach activities can then be produced. The project looks at the Australian "Greek café" as a key element in the Americanization of Australian eating and social habits during the twentieth century. For the past two years, we have been taking oral history interviews (in English and Greek) with

those who operated, worked in and frequented these cafés, copying their historical images, photographing the interviewees, traveling to sites of Greek cafés to document what remains and acquiring café tableware, signs, menus, confectionery tins and boxes and printed café advertisements. Already we have traveled some 10,000 km. Because of these efforts, a display within the Australian History Museum is being mounted, lectures on the Greek café have been provided for the Department of Modern History, information and images are being entered into a database for accessibility to scholars and students and an internationally touring exhibition on the subject is to be designed and assembled. The exhibition will be produced in partnership between our Project, the Australian History Museum, a major New South Wales cultural institution, possibly the Power House Museum or the State Library of New South Wales and probably the Macquarie University Art Gallery. A companion book and education kit will accompany this show. Appropriate venues in the United States are currently being negotiated, including Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York and the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC.

### **Engaging Communities**

"Engaging communities" is at the heart of what the "In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians" National Project does. It engages and then cross-links the university community, the Greek-Australian community, the broader Australian community and even the international community. Because of this engagement, part of Australia's cultural diversity and hybridism is acquiring greater visibility within the museum and historical narrative context.

### **Contact**

Leonard Janiszewski  
Research Fellow  
Department of Modern History  
Australian History Museum  
Macquarie University  
New South Wales, 2109  
Australia  
Tel: (61-2) 9850 688  
Fax: (61-2) 9850 6594  
Email: greekoz@hmn.mq.edu.au

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